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An Idealist Philosophy of Life
S. Radhakrishnan—a book review

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This Fashion of Suicide

Horace James Bridges

I

As in other times of trouble, many people latterly have taken flight from their burden of woes by self-destruction. Suicide, a chronic evil, always increases when economic and material affairs go wrong. Among individuals and classes subjected to what is for them abnormal strain or suffering, the temptation to take the easiest way out becomes apparently irresistible.

I say "for them," because this is a matter of states of mind, standards of expectation, notions of what men demand from the world or think they have a "right" to. Above the line of actual destitution, wealth and poverty are mainly states of mind. The other day I heard of a man whose income has been reduced from $35,000 a year to $3,000. He feels destitute. He is thinking in terms of the poorhouse, or possibly of that last refuge of the defeated, self-murder. Yet if I could lift some of my settlement-house neighbors from the nothing a week most of them are living on,—and keeping wonderfully cheerful on,—to $3,000 a year, they would feel wealthier than any Croesus or Rockefeller ever did.

War seems to act on men's nerves differently from economic troubles. At least during the first two years of the last war, the number of suicides, in several of the countries involved, fell considerably below the peace-time average. Evidently there are troubles so great, and so universally shared, that merely personal griefs and problems become swamped and submerged. Patriotic feeling, when a nation's life is at stake, nerves men and women to endure to the uttermost, to rise above bereavement, and to "carry on" with a smile in the teeth of all disasters. What psychological queerity in men is it that leads them to make jokes about a Zeppelin bomb through

the roof, and kill themselves when the bank demands unproducible collateral?

The suicide of Ivar Kreuger was at first explained charitably. He was a Titan of business and finance, and his recent illness magnified to him the difficulties of his huge industrial consolidations. "Nervous breakdown," we said,—before we had learned of his defalcations, forgeries, and misrepresentations, and the exposure that awaited him.

Mr. Eastman is still judged charitably. He was an old man, eminently successful and fortunate in his affairs, and he had become the victim of a disease assumed to be incurable. He had been in many ways a fine, serviceable, public-spirited citizen. Alike by his photographic inventions and by his civic and educational activities and benevolences, he had benefited the community, and deserved well of it. The reason he assigned for taking his life was that "his work was done, and why should he wait longer?" We shall try later to answer this question.

In Chicago recently, a family of three,—a Quaker missionary, who had worked for years in the Far East, and his wife and son—committed a joint suicide, apparently in order to escape the exposure of some moral delinquency involving one or more of them. In their case, the explanation was conjectured that in the course of their Oriental life they had imbibed the Japanese view on the subject of self-destruction.

The number of "accidents" through which men of large but involved affairs have fallen from thirteenth-story windows or twentieth-story fire-escapes has increased portentously during the past three years. Juries have been generous in returning verdicts which have shielded the reputations of such men, to say nothing of securing to their survivors the benefits of accident insurance and double-indemnity clauses in life policies. Yet there remains in the public mind a streak of scepticism as to why these "accidents" should occur so much more frequently in periods of financial loss than in times of large and easy gain.

But while such episodes have occurred with sad frequency during the present crisis, there has been a startling absence of discussion as to the rights and wrongs of voluntary death. So

far as the public press is concerned, there has been little or no criticism, even of suicides committed, to all appearance, by men whole and sane in mind. This constitutes a significant difference between our times and other periods of trouble which were marked by epidemics of self-killing. For nothing is more certain than that the number of these tragedies will rise or fall according to the state of public opinion and moral judgment on the subject. It always has done so, both in antiquity and in modern times. When the conditions of life are harsh and difficult, a strong and active public conscience against suicide will certainly diminish the number; whereas the prevalence of teaching sanctioning the act as a permissible way of escape from one's troubles, a tone of public opinion in which indulgence or approval excludes censure, will as certainly increase it.

II

Before passing further into our problem, one observation must be emphatically made, and the reader is asked to bear it in mind throughout this discussion. It is this:

Our moral judgment in condemning the act of suicide does not mean that we condemn alike all those who resort to it. Many circumstances affect the degree of an individual's responsibility. The public is right in its charitable readiness to assume that the self-destroyer is probably of unsound mind. We are to think of him always with sympathy and compassion. But we must nevertheless judge the deed, even though we refrain from judging the doer.

We must judge the deed because of the fact above noted,—that the number of such deeds will fall if each man knows that all men disapprove them. This is the common sense of the old theological maxim, "Hate the sin but love the sinner." It is neither a hypocritical nor a self-contradictory precept. Among the influences that tend to raise the level of human conduct, none is more powerful than a clear and definite public opinion.

One modern evidence of this among ourselves was the epidemic of suicides that followed the famous utterances of Col. Ingersoll on the subject during the troubled times caused

by the panic of the 1890's. Ingersoll gave the widest and most reckless authorization to self-destruction; and then, when the bodies of self-destroyers were found with his pamphlets or articles in their pockets, he sought to dodge his clear responsibility by the feeble plea, "People do not kill themselves because of the ideas of others." This from the man who had all his life been denouncing the teachings of orthodox religion because of their alleged evil effects on the conduct of the mass of men!

It is worth while to consider what men at different times have thought about this matter. A backward glance at the varying judgments of our predecessors, and at the reasons for them, is a helpful preliminary to the formation of our own convictions. And what is more important, when suicides are multiplying among us, than to decide what we ought to think and feel on the question?

In general, we find that men's views of suicide have varied in the ratio of the value and sacredness they have attributed to human life, their sense of man's dignity and worth. In the East, for example, where life is held very cheaply, suicide has always abounded, and there seems to have been no public conscience against it. If a Chinaman wished to insult you, he would do it by killing himself on your doorstep. And Mr. McGovern, the eminent Orientalist, reminds us that "a multitude of circumstances make suicide a praiseworthy act, according to the philosophy of the Japanese of the old nobility."

Opinions varied among the ancient Greeks and Romans. Plato was dead against it in principle, though, like most modern philosophers, he admitted that there are exceptional circumstances which may justify it. Some of the Romans agreed with his condemnation. Ovid, for example, thought that suicide was ordinarily a coward's refuge:

> "Rebus in adversis facile est contemnere vitam;
> Fortiter ille facit qui miser esse potest."

"When things go badly, it is easy to scorn life; he acts more bravely who can endure wretchedness." Such was also the opinion of Julius Caesar. But the majority, especially among the Stoics and Epicureans, favoured and sanctioned self-de-

struction as a way of escape from disgrace, misfortune, or unbearable suffering.

Of this mind were Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus and Seneca. Here are a few utterances gathered from various writings of the last name:—

> To death alone it is due that life is not a punishment; that, erect beneath the frowns of fortune, I can preserve my mind unshaken and master of itself. I have one to whom I can appeal. I see before me the crosses of many forms. . . . I see the rack and the scourge, and instruments of torture adapted to every limb and to every nerve; but I also see Death. She stands beyond my savage enemies, beyond my haughty fellow-countrymen. Slavery loses its bitterness when by a step I can pass to liberty.
>
> Wherever you look, there is the end of evils. You see that yawning precipice—there you may descend to liberty. You see that sea, that river, that well—liberty sits at the bottom. . . . Do you seek the way to freedom?—you may find it in every vein of your body.
>
> Depart from life as your impulse leads you, whether it be by the sword, or the rope, or the poison creeping through the veins; go your way and break the chains of slavery. Man should seek the approbation of others in his life; his death concerns himself alone. That is the best which pleases him most. . . . The eternal law has decreed nothing better than this, that life should have but one entrance and many exits. Why should I endure the agonies of disease, and the cruelties of human tyranny, when I can emancipate myself from all my torments and shake off every bond? For this reason, but for this alone, life is not an evil—that no one is obliged to live. The lot of man is happy, because no one continues wretched but by his fault. If life pleases you, live. If not, you have a right to return whence you came.

It is hard to understand how a man like Seneca, many of whose moral perceptions were so fine and penetrating, could have committed himself to such disastrous nonsense. "Slavery loses its bitterness when by a step I can pass to liberty"! It does not; it loses its bitterness by being abolished for every man, and in no other way. "His death concerns himself alone." What then of his wife, his children, his friends, his employees or employers, the discouraged people whom his act still further discourages and tempts to imitate him? What of the commonwealth he ought to serve, and the hideous censure upon it which his deed constitutes? "Why should I endure . . . the cruelties of human tyranny, when I can emancipate myself?"

—Yes, and leave those tyrannies still flourishing in power over all your fellows, and your fellows deprived of your help toward combatting them! How is Rome to get rid of Nero, if Nero's victims destroy themselves instead of combining against him?

Whoever has read Ingersoll's wild and mischievous pages on suicide will see that he had drawn his inspiration from Seneca. He makes no citations and gives no references, but his whole tone, the type of cases he describes, and the similes and figures of speech he uses, show his indebtedness to the Roman thinker.

It is a peculiar fact that on this subject there is no overt and specific word in the Bible,—a fact apparently overlooked by Shakespeare when he makes Hamlet wish that "the Everlasting had not fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter." While the spirit of the Jewish and Christian scriptures is undoubtedly against suicide, yet the absence of any positive prohibition leaves the matter as a problem for the moral judgment of believers in these religions.

What their solution of the problem has been, history shouts at us. The Western world came to regard suicide with the deepest horror and repulsion, as the most flagitious and unpardonable of all crimes. The self-destroyer was buried at cross-roads, with a stake driven through his body. Setting aside for the moment the question of the justice of the feeling thus dramatically expressed, the violent symbolism leaves us in no doubt as to the depth and force of the feeling itself.

In harmony with this, we note that Dante tasks to the utmost the boundless ingenuity of his imagination to express his horror of self-slaughter. In his journey through the Inferno, he comes upon the suicides at the bottom of the Seventh Circle,—below even the murderers and tyrants. (Note the mediaeval conviction, thus symbolized, that suicide is worse than murder.) In Hell the self-destroyers have no bodies, but they do not thereby escape torment: they are turned into trees, on which the harpies feed. The reason is given:

"Non è giusto aver ciò ch'uom si toglie."

"It is not just that men should have that which they had thrown away."

This striking contrast with the antique view is noteworthy. Even those pagan moralists of Greece and Rome who were opposed to suicide had no such horror of it as the mediaevals; and what the mediaevals would have thought of—and done to—any of their number who should have dared to agree with the views of Seneca hardly needs stating. It is clear that the difference in question is a natural, though perhaps an exaggerated, development from that profound conviction of the sacredness of human life, which is the achievement of Judaism and Christianity, and constitutes the most remarkable difference between them and the pagan religions. The horror and detestation of suicide is a manifestation of the same feeling which gradually made the exposure of infants, slavery, and the subjection and degradation of women (all of which in antiquity were taken for granted and scarcely aroused any protest) unbearable to the evolving human conscience.

III

Now, in times like ours, when for millions of people theological doctrines are ceasing to hold any force or meaning, it is most important to stress the historical and psychological fact that developments of moral discrimination are not produced by such doctrines. The truth is the other way about. The deeper moral insights come first, and independently; and then the doctrines are developed to account for them. Men first acquire a feeling that something previously sanctioned is morally wrong, or that something before neglected ought to be done, and then think out a religious theory to sanction the new departure.

This order of evolution is generally forgotten or ignored: which is one great reason why to-day we are in danger of losing some of the most valuable advances the race has made in the field of moral practice. Because so many of us are unable to accept the explanations of them and the sanctions for them that satisfied our forebears, we tend to discard the standards themselves.

No procedure could be more irrational. All explanations—in science, politics and aesthetics, as well as in ethics—sooner or later wear out, and need revision or replacement.

In the case of ethics, if there is to be any progress at all, the new insight, the new conviction, must come first, and the explanation or justification of it afterwards; just as, in the growth of science, we first encounter new facts, and then try to assimilate them to some general "law." If we never acted upon a moral intuition until we possessed a complete and unchallengeable rational vindication of it, there could be no such thing as ethical evolution at all. Particularly is this true because of the ancient connection between morals and supernaturalistic dogmas. From this it has resulted that almost all new ethical insight has presented itself at first as religious heresy. The prophets have had the immense added difficulty of changing codes supposed to be backed by divine sanction,—and then, incidentally and gradually, of introducing new and more elevated notions of the character of the gods.

It is also worth remarking that in the field of science we never dream of denying a fact simply because at the moment we are unable to explain it. Just now, for example, physics is in a state of great confusion. Certain awkward happenings are committing *lèse-majesté* against the august laws of thermodynamics. One expert has humorously stated that these laws are now valid on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, but are broken on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The quantum h of Planck's formula has played the devil with orthodox scientific determinism. But not even the most hidebound upholder of scientific orthodoxy thinks for a moment of denying or refusing to recognize the recalcitrant facts. It is simply axiomatic that any scientific hypothesis or "law," when found to be "inadequate to the subtlety of nature," must be modified.

But a new discrimination in the moral field is as much a fact as gravitation or electrons. An insight which carries further some obligation formerly recognized, or imposes a new one,—like some of the ethical discoveries of the Hebrew prophets, or Plato or Buddha, or the Founder of Christianity, —is an objective reality. True, there are people to-day who altogether deny objectivity in morals, mostly on the ground that different nations at different times have held contradictory views as to what is right and wrong. They might as well deny objective truth in physical science, because people have

differed as to the nature and causation of material phenomena at least as much as about moral obligation. Fortunately, however, we need not waste time in arguing with them, because they always very kindly refute themselves, by proceeding to denounce all sorts of existing social facts and current courses of conduct, as *wrong;* whereas in the absence of objective reality and authority in the moral field nothing can be wrong that anybody chooses to do. The point to remember is that when one of these new aspects of ethical reality is discerned, it is felt to be authoritative upon detection, and before the philosopher can exhibit in detail the reasons for its validity.

Let us now glance at the theological considerations that have been assigned for the conviction that suicide is a sin. Plato, in the *Phaedo,* introduces Socrates citing "a doctrine whispered in secret" (in the Mysteries, presumably) "that man is a prisoner who has no right to open the door and run away." Socrates does not quite understand this, but he too believes that "the gods are our guardians, and that we men are a possession of theirs." That is why "there may be reason in saying that a man should wait, and not take his own life until God summons him, as he is now summoning me."

This is a characteristic bit of Plato's mysticism. He has a profound feeling against suicide, but he cannot quite account for it; as many a man may act upon a point of honor that seems authoritative without being clear, and that he could not explain to others, especially to those who did not spontaneously feel it. But the teaching of Socrates is very like the sayings in the Bible that are cited to the same purpose. None of these precisely declares suicide to be wrong, but they are naturally held to imply that it is. "Know ye not that your body is a temple of the holy spirit which is in you, which ye have from God? And ye are not your own; for ye were bought with a price." Clearly, St. Paul and Socrates here stand pretty close together.

IV

Let us grant, to save argument, that both of them indulge in a piece of poetry or mysticism which we cannot take literally. Still, the problem is to explain the *feeling* underneath it,—

remembering always, as above contended, that with both of them the feeling in question is the ultimate fact to be accounted for. It was that which produced their arguments (or allegations) about the gods' proprietorship of us; not *vice versâ*. If we are not a "possession" of the gods, if we were not "bought" by Jesus Christ, are we then absolutely and unconditionally our own property, and at our own disposal? Or are we bound, indeed, to our fellow-men, but only contractually,—only obliged by loyalties which we have voluntarily undertaken? Are there no duties which bind us whether we will or no,—*e. g.*, to our children, our parents, our fellow-citizens, our country? Can I be under an obligation of honor with which my own consent has nothing to do, and on which I never was nor could be consulted?

The wild excesses of present-day individualism (shared in, by-the-way, by many professed socialists) rebel against the very idea of binding ties and unconditional loyalties. It is strangely forgotten that such ties, such loyalties, are the groundwork, the warp and woof of human society. But for their general acceptance in the past, we should not be here to-day. The human race, without this cement, would either have become extinct, or, at best, could never have risen above the level of primaeval savagery. We are here in the enjoyment of the mighty heritage of civilization because countless men have labored and suffered, and died or been willing to die, to render our life possible and to create its wonderful setting.

That we owe a duty to our country, for example, is self-evident to every unsophisticated and unperverted mind; and, the duty once admitted, it is clear that we can never fully discharge it and never win release from it. "Duty to our country" is the abstract way of saying that we are in honor bound to pay as far as we can for all the blessings and privileges we owe to it,—just as clearly as a man is bound to pay for the meal he has eaten at a restaurant. We eat at our nation's board from the day we are born till the day we die. Even when we are justly and necessarily in revolt against it, we owe to it the principles and standards on behalf of which we fight, and we fight not to destroy but to perfect it. We are chronically and incurably in debt to all the dead who have made it

what it is, as well as to all the living whose labors of hand or head are sustaining it. Where would our eloquent anti-patriots and deniers of moral obligation be without that noble language, the growth of many centuries, in which their denunciations and their jibes and sneers are communicated to the minds they poison? How could they rail against "Babbitt" and "the boobs," except by contrasting them with the high achievements of civilization, which the denouncers themselves assuredly never created? How could they make a point of the sordidness and hypocrisies of mean commercial minds, except by tacitly juxtaposing them with the great traditions of honor and public service exemplified, and thereby validated, by the sacrifice of great men's lives, and the labors of their hands and minds?

Even individual genius is quite rightly and exactly spoken of as a "gift." It has been said that the self-made man is the only one who unceasingly adores his creator. This might be true if there were, or could be, any self-made men; it is rendered false by the trifling circumstance that those powers which the self-helper utilizes were deposited in him out of that great human storehouse upon which we all perforce draw. Each of us thus starts his life under a burden of debt.

But "duty to our country" is an inclusive term. It covers and binds together a multitude of minor loyalties, such as those to our families, teachers, colleagues, fellow-workers, and the anonymous unseen army who are perpetually ministering to each of us. "Country" is the superordinate to which each of these is subordinate.

Country, however, should not be the highest object of any man's allegiance. In the teeth of the hyper-patriotism and exaggerated nationalism which to-day are bedevilling the world, it must be defiantly proclaimed that every man's duty to his own land is subordinate to, rationally depends upon, and is included within, the duty he owes to humanity at large. We live, as George Eliot said, because of "the plowing and sowing of dead generations"; and we are cads if we forget the fact. Behind every existing nation stands a range of others, from which the best in each existing nation was derived. This is only more obvious, but not more true, in our own youthful and

heterogeneous nation than in the states of Europe and Asia. Each of these is also dependent upon, and interdependent with, a larger whole.

To deny, then, our debt to humanity in the gross is to ignore, foolishly and meanly, a palpable fact. But then even the human race in its totality—that is, including all past generations, every living human creature, and all that mankind may hereafter become—constitutes only a dependent province of reality. Humanity is no more self-made or self-sustaining than any individual man. It is the child of what geographers call "an oblate spheroid," but what the poet with equal truth terms "the mighty Mother of mankind." And this flying ball on which we dizzily balance is subtly linked with sister planets and the sun and stars and nebulae. It even seems possible, if Dr. Millikan and other physicists are right, that our earth and its inhabitants draw daily sustenance of energy in "cosmic rays" from inter-stellar space. This is the concrete fact which underlies all the traditional metaphors and pious maxims about our dependence upon God. We did not *make* ourselves or our nature;—not any one of us, and not all of us together. And without the perpetual operation of the "eternal Power not ourselves"—whatever it may be—we could not sustain ourselves for a moment.

Bah! says the materialist. How can we owe, or pay if we owe, a debt to the universe at large? The universe is dead and mindless. It is "blind," says Bertrand Russell—who, however, is constrained to add that the fact that we are *not* blind is "a strange mystery." Perhaps so. It certainly seems a little odd that a dead and blind machine should produce something incommensurably different from and greater than itself. But if we are to go shopping for mysteries, we might as well seek them in some more attractive warehouse than Lord Russell's; and to some of us it may still seem that there is something a trifle unsatisfactory and inadequate about a philosophy that is compelled (in its lucid moments) to abandon the explanation of life, mind and consciousness as an impenetrable riddle.

This, however, we can say: that the debt we owe to the universe at large can be partially paid (no man could pay it

fully) by deciphering its direction, as gauged and indicated by our own relation to the antecedent life whence ours is derived. When we compare the unicellular organisms with the higher mammals, and the anthropoid apes with man, and men in general with Socrates and Shakespeare and Jesus, we detect a certain course of what we call evolution. Life, through a series of exfoliations, has culminated in rational mind and ethical will. So far as this planet is concerned, we are the sole depositaries and trustees of these highest achievements of the world; and of what it may have achieved elsewhere we know nothing.

Well, then, if the minor ties are binding, and present an irresistible claim upon our honor and loyalty, by what logic can we evade the yet stronger appeal of the major tie? If I cannot, without being a scamp, fail in grateful returns of service to a parent, a friend, a teacher, a business associate who has aided me, how can I be disloyal to that over-arching unity and creative source upon which all these, together with myself, are in perpetual dependence? A debt to one's country must needs extend to that which has rendered possible the existence of one's country. If you are under the highest obligation of honor to stand by your nation's flag when it is imperilled, you must be under the like obligation to respect and fulfil the trust which the evolving universe lays upon mankind,—which is, to carry forward and enhance those achievements of mind and conscience toward which it has labored so long and so greatly, and of which we are the sole custodians.

That is how we are to pay the debt under which we lie to the universe. When Oscar Wilde made the foolish remark that "we cannot pay for sunsets," Mr. Chesterton quietly but effectively replied that we can pay for them—by not being Oscar Wilde. We are to see to it that the distinctive constitution of man, so far as it is in our wardship, is rendered more human, lifted farther above the jungle.

Incidentally, those who deny the objectivity of moral distinctions and obligations are making a great renunciation for themselves, though they generally seem to be unconscious of the fact. For to deny that other men have any unconditional claim upon me, is logically to affirm that I have no such claim

on them. Mr. Steffens seems all his life to have been disturbed because his professors at college failed to make clear to him why stealing is wrong. Well, according to Lord Russell and his school, stealing isn't wrong for anybody who wants to do it. "All moral rules must be tested by examining whether they tend to realize ends that we desire. I say ends that we desire, not ends that we *ought* to desire. What we 'ought' to desire is merely what someone else wishes us to desire." Ivar Kreuger, Al Capone, and Captain Kidd would have rejoiced to take that oracle for their slogan. It would have been a treasure trove to Jesse James and Gyges and King Charles II. Denying duties is denying rights, for rights and duties are the same things looked on from different sides.

V

Now, suicide is the denial and rejection of all duties together. Yet there are said to be some exceptional circumstances in which it is permissible. This requires thinking through, and stating accurately.

Undoubtedly there are circumstances in which one has a right to take one's own life,—or to throw it away in a fashion practically equivalent to killing oneself. When Captain Oates, whose sickness was hindering the progress of his half-starved companions across the Antarctic Plateau, decided not to burden them further, and walked out of the tent into the blizzard, saying, "I am going outside. I may be some time," he earned the epitaph since erected to him there: "Hereabouts died a very gallant gentleman." Those on the *Titanic* who stood aside to admit the women and children to the boats won the same commendation. A Lucrece or a Monna Vanna who prefers dying to giving birth to the child of her outrage may be conceded a right to the preference. There are other such cases.

But, for the sake of clear thinking, in the exceptional circumstances which justify self-destruction, it should be called not suicide but martyrdom. The difference is fundamental, and perfectly clear. Martyrdom is the sacrifice of one's individual life in the service of the main ends of the general life. Suicide is the abandonment of that service for the sake of one's

own relative ease. The martyr dies for the army; the suicide deserts from it.

Mr. Eastman says, "My work is done; why should I wait longer?" The answer is, "How do you know?" Was there nobody in America in these distracted times who could have been helped by his counsel, the fruit of his great wisdom and experience? A man's work is done when it is no longer possible for him, by deed, or word, or *example,* to render any further service to any other human being. And that time can only come with a natural and unpreventable death, supervening upon a life prolonged to the utmost.

Should I then endure incurable illness? Yes. To say nothing of the frequent uncertainty as to whether illnesses really are incurable (a relative of mine enjoyed thirty years of fair average health after the doctors had given her two days to live),—what about the inspiration conveyed by the spectacle of pain nobly borne? While reason remains, cannot the sufferer inspire courage, kindle love, bestow sympathy, and transmit the results of his experience and the discipline he has undergone?

Still more clearly is it our honorable obligation to endure ruined business affairs. No man is ruined alone. I am to stand by, until the chance comes for me to help the others who have shared my losses or the result of my mistakes. I am to take my share of the thought and labor of the reconstruction that must be made. By deserting, I do not end the troubles in which I have been involved, but only shift them, in worsened form, to the shoulders of others, while depriving those others of my possible help.

"But suppose, by killing myself, I rescue my family from poverty through my life insurance—and accident insurance, if I can arrange my exit so that a sympathetic jury will declare it accidental?" This argument has been much used lately. It almost makes one despair,—because to answer it one has to go such a long way back! Briefly, the answer is that you had better live and commit a burglary than die committing a theft—for a moral theft it is, a theft from all the other policy-holders and stockholders in your insurance company, even though the law permits it.

Many of our business men who have committed suicide have illustrated only the appalling emptiness of a life which has no other object but material gain. This is a terrific commentary on our civilization. Nothing is to-day depressed but the money phase of life. The beauty of nature is as thrilling as ever. Music retains its life-enhancing power in all its fullness. Science is still bewitching, philosophy still divine. Literature feeds our souls as freely and fully as in prosperous days. Conversation—between minds that are not dead, and buried in balance-sheets—still lifts us out of and above ourselves. If with all these resources we cannot fight through our difficulties, we simply confess that all along we have sacrificed the making of a life to the making of a living.

I repeat that I am "judging the sin, not the sinner." I condemn individually none of those who have destroyed themselves. We cannot know how responsibly or irresponsibly any of them acted. I have been trying to set out the considerations that should weigh with all of us, *before* the temptation becomes overwhelming,—and that, in many cases, will prevent it from becoming overwhelming. I have tried to justify what I believe is the spontaneous conviction of healthy minds, that we are under the deepest and most sacred obligation to stand at our post, like faithful sentinels. To run away is the act of a deserter, who not only breaks faith with his comrades but also increases their danger. Martyrdom, sacrifice for the high ends of life, is heroism; suicide is not justifiable.

The Free Church of America

Sydney Bruce Snow

What may prove to be a movement of great significance to the organized expression of religion on this continent is the joint proposal, by Unitarian and Universalist Commissions, to establish in the near future The Free Church of America. The proposal is the fruit of a year's deliberation by the two Commissions, but it is the climax of negotiations extending over several decades. Far-seeing leaders have long recognized that the aims of the Universalist and Unitarian bodies were essentially the same, and that those aims could more effectively be served by union than by separate effort. Until the present time, however, the various committees and commissions could get no further than occasional attempts at cooperation in church extension.

The relative failure of earlier negotiations has been due in part to the nature of the proposals, i.e., some form of immediate merger, for which the time was never ripe; and in part to the attitude towards the proposals of the two bodies concerned. Among Unitarians the attitude might be described, until recently, as one of sectarian indifference; among Universalists there has been increasing preoccupation with the thought of closer relations with the more liberal of the older churches. This trend towards the Right led, a few years ago, to active negotiations between the Universalists and Congregational churches, which seemed likely, for a time, to be successful. Many Universalists, however, insisted on the inclusion of the Unitarians in a three-party conference to consider organization of a wider fellowship; and, since this went beyond the purpose of the National Conference of Congregational Churches, the efforts came to naught.

It is fair to say that although Universalists as a whole were favorably disposed towards closer relations with the

Congregationalists, many in the church felt a strong bond with the Unitarians, and were unwilling to go where those who had borne with them the burden and heat of the day, during nearly a hundred years outside the pale, could not follow. In this decision, in the opinion of the writer, the Universalist Church chose wisely, not only from a general but from its own point of view. The historic position and the tradition of the Universalist body have been liberal. It has shared with the Unitarians both the odium and the glory of theological pioneering. It has suffered with the Unitarians the handicap of separation from the main stem of Christianity, and has profited by the freedom for development which this separation gave. Union with even the most modernist of what must be called (for lack of a better term) the orthodox churches, could not be interpreted as other than a step backward for the church of Hosea Ballou. Moreover, the relative smallness of the Universalist Church would make of union with a great body a swallowing up; within a generation its name and memory would be buried in church history books. An arrangement with the Unitarian Church, on the other hand,—with a body of equal size and similar tradition,—would result in the carrying on of the spirit and continuous history of both, in a church greater, by reason of their union, than both. More important than the urge for denominational self-preservation, however, was the possibility which the closer cooperation of the two outspoken liberal churches gave for furthering the cause of liberal religion, in a day when the opportunity of liberal religion is of such importance as to be a responsibility to America. This was without doubt the motive which underlay the attitude and action of the Universalist Church.

At the present time it is certain that many Universalists and Unitarians are ready for complete organic union of their churches; but the two Commissions, with the caution (often wise) that always marks such bodies, evidently concluded that such union could not now be brought about without division and loss. Also, as a recently issued report states, the Commissions hope to lay the foundation for a larger and more inclusive fellowship of liberals than are at present interested in the plan. They have, therefore, proposed the organization

of what looks on the surface to be a kind of holding corporation for the common liberal movement, but may better be described as a working partnership,—The Free Church of America already mentioned in the opening sentence of this article. The two Commissions, voting to call themselves the Council of the new Church, have already won approval of the plan in principle by the American Unitarian Association, and by the Trustees of the Universalist General Convention. It will be submitted for final approval to both fellowships at their annual meetings this year. The plan contemplates no immediate change in the denominational organization of either body. It is offered as a practicable way of affiliation without disturbing existing machinery or management of funds, the question of funds being one on which many promising plans of cooperation are brought to naught. Individual churches, continuing to retain their present names, would indicate association with the Free Church of America.

If this were all, the project would seem to be one of nomenclature only, doomed from the beginning to failure. Any one familiar with the history of religious liberalism in America can recall the formation of organizations, beginning with ambitious unifying programs, which ended as a Secretary devising programs for conferences. They are object lessons in futility. The organization now being formed, however, is for far more than the vague affiliation of talk. It proposes also an immediate, practical program,—i. e., the carrying on in common, "so far as their objectives will permit," of twenty or more enterprises now managed separately. These include such important concerns as church extension, women's, laymen's and young people's work. If the Free Church from the beginning promotes actual union of effort under its aegis, and gradually increases such practical cooperation, it will only be a matter of time when it will overshadow its constituent parts, as the Federal government in the republic overshadows those of the States.

Some of the plans for united effort are so much in the realm of practical politics that the mere proposal has brought them about in advance of the establishment of the new Church. In recent months the two commissions that by happy chance

were engaged simultaneously in revising denominational hymnals have pooled their labors, and will recommend the issuance of a single book by the Free Church. Only this month the Unitarian Wayside Pulpit and the Universalist Community Pulpit (both used, by the way, by many churches of other denominations) became one, under the name of the Wayside Community Pulpit. The departments of social relations and of religious education in the two churches have also already undertaken common enterprises. A new movement, the Mission Brotherhood, outgrowth of the Unitarian Laymen's League Preaching Mission, has been founded within the past few months as a joint organization. At least a negative degree of cooperation in Church extension has for many years existed by virtue of the two bodies' restraint in competition; positive cooperation has been shown by the actual combining of forces in Florida; and by the union in several cities of Unitarians and Universalists in a United Liberal Church.

Perhaps the most potent common means of promoting the interests of the new Church in the beginning, and of guiding the opinion of those who must support it, is a weekly journal; and it is possible that this may be achieved within the year. Here, as in some of the other consolidations of the present day, economic pressure has a part. The Trustees of *The Christian Register* (the Unitarian paper) have been obliged, because of diminished income, to turn to a volunteer editorial committee in place of a salaried editor; and *The Christian Leader* (Universalist) would be little better off if did not possess an endowment. Negotiations are now going on to combine the two. From a single paper it is but a short step to a single publishing house. During the past year a commission of the American Unitarian Association has paved the way for cooperation in propaganda by a thorough revision of free publications, cutting the number by two-thirds, and providing for the issuance of new publications easily adaptable to common use.

In the field of international church relations the formation of the Free Church of America may play an important part. Since the war there has been a significant stirring of interest in liberal religion in Europe. The old International Congress

of free churches has been recently reorganized as the International Association of Religious Liberals, and its headquarters have been established in Holland. Both Universalists and Unitarians are affiliated with this Association; a united church in America is likely to bulk large in what seems to be an imminent world-wide awakening of religious liberalism. The writer, who has had opportunty of personal contact with several of the European movements, hazards the guess that their future is of more consequence than their present numerical strength would indicate.

Are the Universalist and Unitarian people ready in spirit for the amalgamation which these beginnings of common effort imply? The writer, after nearly five years' experience with both bodies in the Middle West, believes that, in the great inland region named, they are. Though a Unitarian by affiliation, he feels entirely at home in a Universalist gathering. In the Middle West, the two churches do not rival; they complement each other. The Unitarians are stronger in the large cities; the Universalists are stronger in the smaller cities and the towns. The Unitarians have a more efficient regional organization; the Universalists have more effective state conferences. Together, one body would supplement the other. In The Meadville Theological School, there already exists a powerful unifying institution. More than four years ago the School was combined with the Ryder Divinity School (Universalist), an affiliated School with the University of Chicago; and its former dean is now a member of the Meadville Faculty. Students from Universalist churches are beginning to resort to Meadville for their training. Men who study for the ministry together are not likely, when in charge of churches, to emphasize divisive sectarian lines. No change of charter or by-laws is necessary to make this School, which has never been under denominational control, a natural source of supply for the ministry of the Free Church of America.

It ought to be added that students of both denominations and of various other denominations are welcomed at the theological schools of Harvard, Tufts and St. Lawrence, which likewise, without change in their present status, are fitted to prepare ministers for a liberal church under any name.

No thoughtful observer of religious tendencies in America (or the world, for that matter) can deny the responsibility, already alluded to, that rests today on the liberals. It rests heavily on the modernists within the older churches, who have made so great a contribution in the Twentieth Century battle with fundamentalism; but the real burden is on the shoulders of those who, without hampering creeds, fixed rituals, tyrannous organizations or authoritative hierarchies, are free to go forward to meet the religious need of the new day. That need, in an age dominated by the spirit of science, is for a church as rigorous in its thinking, as devoid of superstition, as science itself,—a Church, in harmony with the spirit of the time, which nevertheless shall (to quote another's* words), "foster in the lives of persons and in the life of society that spiritual order which is the gift of religion; pursue the perpetual search for truth; encourage the highest ideals of conduct in every relation and in every enterprise; and afford occasion in social worship for that highest joy which is the reward of the complete life."

In order that those who may comprise the Free Church of America shall be able to pursue such purposes as these without hampering conditions, the Council has unanimously proposed the following preamble to its articles of government:

"We, representatives of churches of the free spirit, unite ourselves in the fellowship of the Free Church of America. We affirm our faith that unity of purpose is the bond of highest religious fellowship. We seek closer cooperation with others of like purpose, recognizing that, in accordance with congregational polity, the members of this fellowship have entire freedom in matters of religious belief and statements of faith, and holding that, if we are controlled by a purpose to serve mankind in a spirit of mutual goodwill, differing statements of faith may enrich our common life."

Such a preamble, if accepted by the churches to which it may be proposed, is a charter of freedom and growth.

What would be the numerical strength of the Free Church of America, provided all Universalist and Unitarian Churches of the United States and Canada joined? It would be small enough as compared with the older churches, but more worthy than either of the separate liberal churches of the great task

*Von Ogden Vogt, minister of the First Unitarian Church, Chicago.

confronting them. According to the Unitarian Year Book of 1932-33, there are 372 active Unitarian Churches with a constituency of 136,204; similar figures from Universalist sources show 418 churches (including 45 listed as federated) and a constituency of 86,155 (not including the constituencies of those churches which failed to make returns). The united organization, therefore, would have 790 churches, with a constituency of 222,359. This total could be augmented by an unknown number of persons who look to both groups of churches for some measure of fellowship and guidance.

It is possible, moreover, that the new body would attract to itself a number of independent liberal church organizations; and it is probable, under the enthusiasm of a fresh start, that the work of church extension would presently be more effectively carried on, and that the Free Church of America would grow at a faster rate than did, in times past, the bodies that founded it. If it does not, it will not be meeting the opportunity and responsibility, recognition of which brought it into being.

In this article, the assumption is made that the proposal herein set forth, for a united and more effective organization of the liberal forces in American religion, will be accepted by the Unitarian and Universalist general assembles, and that immediate steps will be taken to make the new church a working body. Only preoccupation with sectarian interests can prevent it. If the two bodies to which the proposal will be presented this year, are more concerned with questions of denominational administration and the control of denominational funds, than with the extension of the cause for which the denominations were created, their energies are liable to flow in ever narrower channels; and other organizations, perhaps less fitted for leadership in things of the spirit, will guide the development of religion in the new day.

An Idealist View of Life

(Hibbert Lectures, 1929)

By S. Radhakrishnan

The key to these Hibbert Lectures is to be found in the author's own words: "Philosophy which once was the pursuit of wisdom has become the possession of a technique. Though philosophy is a system of thought, the experience it organizes must be both rich and comprehensive. . . . Only those whose lives are deep and rich light on the really vital syntheses significant for mankind." This book illustrates the pursuit of wisdom rather than the possession of a technique. The range of Prof. Radhakrishnan's knowledge is literally stupendous. He has the advantage over any European or American writer of being thoroughly familiar with Hindu religions and philosophies concerning which he has written several large volumes. His knowledge of European and American philosophical and religious writings seems to be equally extensive. A rapid survey of the book's table of contents shows that practically every phase of the present-day religious problem is discussed by him. The index reports him as quoting from, or expounding the views of, more than 160 writers, and he quotes from them in a way that indicates thorough familiarity with, and understanding of, their various points of view.

It might be inferred that such a vast weight of learning could not be carried lightly and that his pages must be dull, arid and heavy. Such an inference would be in this case completely wide of the mark. There is a remarkable freshness both in his thought and in his style. The blending in his mind of Oriental and Occidental cultures results in a combination of qualities that is rare in writers on religious and philosophical themes. The original man in him is a Hindu mystic but he looks at life and its spiritual problems through the eyes of

Plato and other European idealists. As a Hindu he is always pursuing wisdom; as a man of Western culture he is familiar with the most recent science and expresses himself with a directness and a clarity that are only too rare in Western philosophical literature. He has more short, pithy sentences to the page than almost any other serious writer now before the public.

But he has also the defects of these fine qualities. His paragraphs are often just strings of short sentences whose inner connection is not very apparent. When we wish him to weave his ideas into a thought-pattern, he often fails us. Moreover, his impatience with technique is not all gain. His reliance on intuition is everywhere in evidence but nowhere does he attempt to justify such reliance or to inform the reader how intuition as a method of knowledge can be defended against such a critic—say—as Morris Cohen. The same criticism is to to be made of all his basic positions. No matter how eager one may be to reach his conclusions, the critical Western reader demands to be shown more openly how the conclusions are reached. The subjective certainties of the mystic are entirely satisfying to the mystic but we surely have a right to expect that the philosopher will do his best to make his certainties seem objectively valid, and Prof. Radhakrishnan hardly meets our expectations in this regard.

In spite of these criticisms, however, it must be said that the book is so full of wisdom, insight, vivid expositions and ringing positive affirmations and the spirit of the writer is so fresh and courageous that no one with any sympathy for an idealist philosophy of life can fail to profit by it. To the preacher especially it will be a treasure-house of stimulating and suggestive points of view. R. J. H.

FORM OF BEQUEST

I give and bequeath unto The Meadville Theological School, located at Woodlawn Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street, in the City of Chicago, Illinois, the sum of_____ Dollars.